The U.S. Can Collapse the Taliban

Sep 18, 2001

Articles & Testimony

One week after the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, world attention is focusing on reprisals against Afghanistan, whose Taliban regime has been sheltering not only Osama bin Laden and his al-Qa'ida organization, but also a myriad of other terrorist groups.

While the war against terrorism announced by President Bush earlier this month will almost certainly not stop at Afghanistan (Iran continues to shelter terrorist leaders like Imad Mughniyah, the mastermind of the 1983 car bomb attacks against the US embassy and marine barracks in Beirut, and Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Commander Ahmad Sharifi, who was implicated in the planning stages of the 1996 bombing of an American military barracks in Khobar, Saudi Arabia), the Taliban will most likely be the first target of any US military retaliation.

Who exactly are the Taliban? The word taliban literally means religious students. The Taliban movement developed in the madaris (religious schools) of Pakistan in the early 1990s. Pakistan was a fertile ground for recruitment, home to perhaps two million Afghan refugees who fled Afghanistan's brutal civil war and idled in squalid refugee camps. With the withdrawal of the Red Army from Afghanistan in 1989, the common enemy disappeared. Former Mujahidin commanders turned on each other with a vengeance. Most of the mines waiting to be cleared are a result not of the Soviet occupation, but a result of indiscriminate scattering by rival warlords after the Soviet withdrawal. Rival factions shelled Kabul regularly. Vehicles traveling between the Pakistani border and Kabul had to traverse the territory of dozens of warlords; rapes, robberies, and murders became rampant. According to Doctors Without Borders, the civil war during the Soviet occupation and its aftermath cost 1.8 million lives.

Given the war exhaustion and destruction of the 1980s and early 1990s, many in Afghanistan viewed the rise of the Taliban with quiet optimism. Afghans are traditional. Many welcomed the Taliban's vision of an Islamic state, at least until they saw what such a state would actually entail.

The Taliban erupted onto the Afghan scene in November 1994, when they captured Kandahar. Through very little military action, but an aura of momentum and an ability to co-opt and accommodate various petty warlords, they expanded their territory, eventually capturing Herat in 1995, Kabul in 1996, and Afghanistan's last major city, Mazar-i Sharif, briefly in 1997, and then permanently in 1998. However, the Taliban were not able to conquer or co-opt Ahmad Shah Massoud, an ethnic Tajik warlord, who set up a pocket of resistance in the Panjshir Valley, both along the Tajikistan border and within surface-to-surface missile range of Kabul (when I was in Kabul in March 2000, two missiles fired from Massoud's territory struck the city).

Massoud's pocket of resistance has been the only major vestige of the Northern Alliance still active inside Afghanistan. Massoud, "the Lion of the Panjshir," was the only Mujahidin commander who remained undefeated during the fight against Soviet occupation. One former intelligence official, personally familiar with Massoud, commented that he maintained a highly-trained corps of personal which he would distribute among the front "to stiffen" less trained troops. While Massoud was assassinated on September 10 (a report in the pan-Arabic daily Al-Hayat on September 11 suggested that bin Laden provided assistance in the killing), his forces are well-equipped to fight on.

In contrast, many Taliban soldiers have little military training. While some argue that the Taliban and mercenary "Afghan Arabs" are really the product of Central Intelligence Agency operations in the 1980s, this is false. Many of the present Taliban were toddlers during the war against the Soviets. Some Arabs did come to Afghanistan during the 1980s, but many of these (including Bin Laden) became engaged in manual labor rather than combat against infidels. One US intelligence operative who worked in Afghanistan during the 1980s said that most of the Arabs coming to the country simply got in the way, and were viewed with disdain by the Mujahidin.

In the current milieu, where battles can be decided by a few dozen troops, Bin Laden supplies assets valuable to the Taliban's fight against the Northern Alliance. Bin Laden's military brigade, which numbers perhaps only 700 (some estimate up to 2000), is the only force that is capable of both night fighting and balancing Massoud's forces. Many of the battles fought between the two sides are battles between the weak and depleted - numbering several hundred troops only. In the final analysis, the Taliban believe that they have gained more from bin Laden's presence and assistance than they have lost from remaining an international pariah.

There are a number of training camps in Afghanistan to which Arabs who missed the jihad against the Soviets now flock. Rish Khor was one such camp, which stood on the outskirts of Kabul, though it was recently closed (or more likely, relocated to a spot less easily accessible to the prying eyes of foreigners). Two Western journalists told me of having their cameras smashed when they got too close to a training camp near Jalalabad, less than 50 miles from the Pakistani frontier. Moneychanger stalls in that city were awash in Saudi currency, and Arabs wearing kaffiyehs (traditional Arab head coverings) were in evidence in far greater numbers than one would expect from the few Middle Eastern aid organizations operating in the city. In August 1998, the US government struck at training camps outside the southeastern city of Khost after bin Laden's operatives attacked the US embassies in Kenya and Tanzania. Clearly, even if the Taliban shelter bin Laden for their own domestic reasons, his presence has become a threat not only to the United States, but to the international community.

The success of the US retaliation against Afghanistan depends on the breadth of American objectives. Singling out bin Laden will likely be of little immediate success, as there are many potential hiding places in Afghanistan. However, the US could easily target the Taliban itself. Despite media commentary that portrays the movement as monolithic, they are anything but, so military action can provide stimulus for a factional implosion.

I traveled through Afhganistan last year and was able to interview a number of Afghans, including members of the Taliban, regular civilians and foreign aid workers who had to work with the Taliban everyday to fulfill their respective humanitarian missions. These interviews indicated that the Taliban is quite divided, both politically and ethnically. Only about 10% of the Taliban members are uncompromising followers of Mullah Omar, the spiritual leader of the group who claims to have received divine inspiration. An additional 30% might believe in Mullah Omar's interpretation of Islamic law, but believe that compromise must be made in its implementation. The rest, Afghans say, do not strongly support the regime, but have superficially pledged loyalty to it in order to keep their jobs.

The Taliban are also ethnically divided. Most of the Taliban are ethnic Pushtun, and combine Mullah Omar's radical interpretation of Islam with the Pushtunwali, the Pushtun social code. The Taliban's treatment of women is rooted, for example, in the tradition of ethnic Pushtun villages, not just a narrow reading of the Quran. Most of northern and western Afghanistan, as well as the capital of Kabul, are Persian-speaking. People in the relatively cosmopolitan (by Afghan standards) capital tend to actively dislike Pushtuns, whom they see as illiterate peasants. The antipathy is mutual. The Taliban exacerbate enmity through arrogance. One woman was left destitute when a Taliban pick-up truck hit her husband; it did not bother to stop. In front of a former palace, I stopped to ask a Taliban for directions in Persian. He did not speak the language, screaming at me to get away in Urdu, the language of Pakistan (since I had grown a beard for five months, did not have a minder and spoke Persian, he presumably did not know I was an

American). One older Afghan who saw him screaming told me not to feel bad, "they treat everyone like that."

Many Afghans in Kabul and Ghazna, who initially welcomed the Taliban because of their promises of peace and tranquillity, told me that the Taliban's honeymoon was ending. The Taliban had failed to end the civil war, and the initial security was eroding. People across the country, but most movingly a Kabul gravedigger who perhaps knows better than anyone else, expressed no confidence that the war would end anytime soon.

Regarding security, many Afghans talked about burglaries perpetrated by the Taliban. Last year, Taliban guards stole almost $200,000 from the Kabul's moneychanger bazaar, without any real consequence. In February 2000, there was an uprising in Khost (in the Taliban heartland, near where the US had struck with cruise missiles in August 1998) when the Taliban tried to appoint a governor who was not from the region. Likewise, an uprising later that year was narrowly averted in Jalalabad only when the Taliban fired an overbearing governor. Last year, an opposition commander set-up another pocket of resistance in the Nimruz province bordering Iran.

CNN might repeatedly report that the Taliban control 90% of the country, but they have extreme difficulty keeping it under control. US missile strikes against the infrastructure of the Taliban government may be enough to cause its grip to unravel. Afghans are poor and weak, and need such a backdrop to break the monopoly of the Taliban. Such action would only be the beginning, but may serve as a warning to officials in Tehran, Damascus, and Gaza, who rhetorically condemn the attacks in New York and Washington, but, as with Baghdad and Kabul, continue to support and shelter groups or individuals engaged in terrorism. ❖

Middle East Intelligence Bulletin

RECOMMENDED

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Bennett’s Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Libya’s Renewed Legitimacy Crisis

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

BRIEF ANALYSIS

The UAE Formally Ceases to be a Tax-Free Haven

Feb 14, 2022

◆

Sana Quadri,
Hamdullah Baycar

(/policy-analysis/uae-formally-ceases-be-tax-free-haven)

TOPICS

Military & Security (/policy-analysis/military-security)

Terrorism (/policy-analysis/terrorism)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)